

ACHIEVING PROFESSIONAL COMMUNITY IN SCHOOLS: THE ADMINISTRATOR CHALLENGE

Introduction

Teachers, administrators and policy makers at all levels of public education remain challenged to devise more effective ways to optimize teacher performance and, thereby, student achievement. Numerous professional organizations and teacher training agencies have long been advocates of high levels of teacher interaction and have formally adopted standards explicating the importance of professional collaborative relationships. For instance, the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (NBPTS) specifies in one of its “five core propositions” that highly proficient teachers work “collaboratively with other professionals on instructional policy, curriculum development and staff development” (NBPTS, 1999, Section 5, ¶ 1). The Interstate New Teacher Assessment and Support Consortium (INTASC) standards expect that the developing teacher is “committed to continuous learning and engages in professional discourse about subject matter knowledge” and student learning (INTASC, 1992, p. 15). The National Staff Development Council (NSDC) considers professional collaboration to be the most powerful form of staff development when teacher teams “operate with a commitment to the norms of continuous improvement and experimentation and engage their members in improving their daily work to advance the achievement of school district and school goals for student learning” (NSDC, 1995, Section 2, ¶ 1).

New norms of high-stakes testing and accountability mechanisms dictate that educators more effectively attain identified student learning outcomes. One means of facilitating higher student achievement is through ‘professional learning communities’—that is, schools which are considered to exemplify typical attributes of teacher shared work that are incompatible with traditional notions of teacher individualism and isolation (Hord, 1997; Rosenholtz, 1989). As Collins (2000) puts it, a school that emerges as a community of learners is “filled with daily examples of people learning from each other, sharing what they are learning, and being excited about and participating in what others are learning” (p. 25). In spite of the widely held recognition of what may be required to promote continuous professional learning, there has been limited success in transferring them to or re-creating them in schools struggling to foster collaborative norms. This may, at least in part, be due to circumstances and attitudes in the schools themselves which may abrogate attempts at creating authentically collaborative environments (Leonard, 1999; Welch, 1998). This paper addresses recent survey data collected from school-based administrators to further examine a phenomenon that is intuitively desirable yet manifestly problematic.

The Emergence of Professional Communities

The field of education has been influenced by and has borrowed much of its newer models of professional relationships from theorists and practitioners in the corporate sector (e.g., Argyris, 1978; Covey, 1991; Drucker, 1985, 1995; Lawler, 1986; Senge, 1990). Frustration spawned by restraints placed upon creative interaction by the traditional forms of bureaucratic organization has resulted in conceptualizations with limited tolerance for the principles of supervisor control and hierarchical management. Outmoded structural configurations were replaced by more inclusive views of how organizational problems should be identified and addressed. The more effective leaders of the post-modern era are considered to be those who do not rely upon the legitimacy of their position but rather utilize mechanisms of high participant involvement (Lawler, 1986; Wohlstetter, Smyer, & Mohrman, 1994). The literature in educational administration has become replete with such evolving leadership conceptions that emphasize the need for the school leader to invite and actively promote high-density involvement not only in administrative or school-wide decisions but also in professional interaction that addresses the everyday work life of teachers (for examples, see: Greenfield, 1980; Hodgkinson, 1991; Leonard, 1997; Noddings, 1992; Starratt, 1993). Such empowerment of teachers through routine collaborative practice is commonly viewed as a key component of developing schools as professional learning communities.

Numerous studies and an expanding cache of scholarly and professional literature have served to promote widespread recognition of the importance of school culture and its potential to manipulate school improvement initiatives (e.g., Chenoweth & Everhart, 2002; Cruz & Zaragoza, 1998; DiPardo, 1997; Fullan, 2001; Hall & Hord, 2001). Typically, the school culture research addresses aspects of shared decision making, teacher accountability, the impact of the trust factor, democratic principles, the moral dimension, and the ability to bring about organizational change. As well, numerous professional development opportunities are considered to accrue from teacher collaborative involvement, among them the benefits derived from mentoring arrangements, critical reflection upon current practices, and the generation of novel ideas. However, to truly exemplify the learning community concept, schools must strive to be places where teachers “want to work” because it “meets their professional needs” (Danielson, 2002, p. 9). Furthermore, and on a more profound note, Goulet, Krentz, and Christiansen (2003) forecast that collaboration has “the potential to provide an alternative, not only to how we think and theorize about educational improvement, but also how we experience teaching, learning, and change” (p. 338).

Basic Assumptions About Collaborative Practices

There is substantial and expanding support for the potential of collaborative cultures to improve teacher work and, consequently, student

achievement (e.g., Chenoweth & Everhart, 2002; Friend & Cook, 2000; Glasgow & Hicks, 2003; Maehr & Midgley, 1996; Stoll & Fink, 1996). There is also ready recognition that creating and sustaining such teaching and learning environments is at best difficult and at worst doubtful. The challenges continuously deflect benefits that may, at times, appear quite elusive.

Central to addressing the challenges of creating contextual conditions favorable to teacher joint work is the necessity of commonly-held beliefs and objectives (Speck, 1999; Hord, 1997; Mitchell, 1995; Odden & Wohlstetter, 1995; O'Neill, 1995). In effect, if educators do not share the same essential perspectives as to what constitutes desirable educational practice and do not maintain a common commitment to shared goals, they are unlikely to work consistently toward collective purposes. As Senge's (1990) seminal discourse about so-called 'learning organizations' in the corporate sector so forcefully pointed out, there is a marked distinction between persons who are truly committed to a goal and those who are merely compliant because they wish to avoid incurring negative feedback from those in authority positions. The result for those in the field of education may, as Fullan (1992) posited, have important implications in terms of teacher and administrator fidelity to collaborative processes. In effect, those who are truly committed to collaboration—as opposed to mere compliance—are more likely to contribute to its realization.

Personal beliefs and attitudes about the inherent worth of collaborative practice may have a significant impact upon any attempts to successfully establish professional learning environments. Stated another way, possible latent conflict may be exposed when the basic and strongly held assumptions behind collaborative value orientations are examined. Begley (1996) noted that one's assumptions, or underlying beliefs, about life and work are "relatively fixed and unnegotiable core values" (p. 8), while Schein (1984) considered them to be "taken for granted," "invisible," and "preconscious" (p. 4). Indeed, it is Schein's (1985, 1990, 1992) discussions of the underlying dimensions of an organization's culture that appear to be quite useful for understanding the basic assumptions associated with a collaborative value orientation and also for guiding researchers in uncovering those basic suppositions. Using Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck's (1961) classification of dominant and variant value orientations, Schein identified seven underlying dimensions of organizational culture. Four of these dimensions, in bold below, are helpful in understanding the basic teacher assumptions about collaborative practices in schools. For the purposes of this and earlier research on educators' value orientations, the authors sought answers to the following questions related to these dimensions:

1. The nature of human activity:

To what extent and under what circumstances might teachers engage in collaborative practices? To what extent are these activities desirable?

2. The nature of human relationships:

To what extent are teachers involved in making decisions about the nature of their work? Is teacher work characterized by teamwork or competition? How important are caring and trusting relationships in achieving schooling goals?

3. Homogeneity vs. diversity:

To what extent is holding values and beliefs in common important for achieving school goals? Are diverse opinions encouraged and individual needs addressed? Is consensus preferable to majority rule?

4. The nature of time:

In terms of teacher work, is collaboration appropriate usage of teacher time and, if so, is there sufficient opportunity to undertake it? Are there sufficiently high expectations for collaborative practice?

Fundamental to this discussion is the premise that values figure highly in the lives and interactions of educational stakeholders (Beck, 1996; Begley, 1996; Campbell-Evans, 1993; Greenfield, 1986; Hodgkinson, 1996) and that such basic values may be manifested in both tangible and intangible ways (Caldwell & Spinks, 1992; Schein, 1990). Earlier research undertaken by the authors indicated considerable variance among teachers in terms of their cultural value orientations (Leonard & Leonard, 2001; Leonard & Leonard, 2003). Consequently, it seemed reasonable that additional inquiry could determine whether there are overall disparities in beliefs and values of teachers, on the one hand, and those of school administrators, on the other, pertaining to the four identified dimensions of organizational culture. Perhaps more important in the context of this study and the researchers' prior work (Leonard, 1997; Leonard & Leonard, 2001; Leonard, 2002; Leonard & Leonard, 2003) is whether the overriding beliefs of either or both groups (i.e., teachers and administrators) are incompatible with attempts to create and sustain professionally collaborative cultures. Furthermore, educators who espouse commitment to collaboration may merely, in Senge's (1990) and Fullan's (1992) terms, be compliant.

Additional clarification is needed as to whether teachers and school administrators, collectively, *value* the collaborative process and in what specific ways collaborative practices are manifested in the work life of the school. In other words, to what extent are educator beliefs and perspectives reflected in actual, common practice? From teachers' perspectives, that question was resoundingly answered in studies previously undertaken by the authors in two American and Canadian jurisdictions (Leonard & Leonard, 2003; Leonard & Leonard, 2002; Leonard, 2002) in that teachers strongly recognized and desired authentically collaborative working environments but felt that circumstances at their schools prohibited their realization. Consequently, two essential questions provided

direction to the study reported here: (a) To what extent do administrators value collaborative practices in schools, and (b) to what extent do administrators perceive collaborative processes are actually occurring in their schools?

Method

The essential purpose of this study was twofold: to ascertain practicing school administrator perspectives on teacher collaboration in their schools, and to determine whether schools appear to be evolving in the direction of actual professional learning communities. Earlier professional collaboration research undertaken by the authors in the United States and Canada (Leonard & Leonard, 2002; 2001; 1999) dealt primarily with teacher perspectives and concluded that conditions for shared learning were substantially less than that considered to be desirable. This study used the same survey instrument used in the 2001 investigation but focused upon the viewpoints of principals and assistant principals. The Likert-type scale items were presented in paired sets with each couple addressing a relevant aspect of Schein's (1992) articulation of the dimensions of organizational culture (i.e., the nature of shared activity, working relationships, diversity, and time). As had been the case with the earlier teacher survey, the participants were asked to respond to the first paired-item "in terms of your personal beliefs about collaborative teacher practice" and the second paired-item "in terms of how you perceive actual conditions or circumstances at your school." The instrument was comprised of 29 items, 24 of which were of scaled-response format (ranging from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree) with the remaining items addressing descriptive aspects of the schools (i.e., school type, community type, and enrollment), and participant demographic information (e.g., gender and years of administrative experience).

Following receipt of permission to proceed from the district superintendents, self-administered questionnaire packets were distributed to school administrators in 12 North Louisiana school districts. The packets contained a cover letter outlining the purpose of the study, a postage-paid return envelope, and the survey instrument with completion instructions. Each copy of the instrument was coded for identification purposes, and a reminder letter was mailed to those who had not returned the survey within a period of two weeks. The principal of each of the 251 schools in the dozen districts was mailed a survey questionnaire packet. Additionally, assistant principal surveys were sent to those 155 schools having at least one designated assistant principal. The combined completed survey return rate was 214 of 406 (52.7%) with respondents being spread over 149 of the 251 (59.4%) of the invited schools. A plurality of participating schools (49%) were at the primary/elementary level, 14% were of junior high/middle school configuration, 13% were high schools, another 13% were junior high-senior high combination, and the remaining 12% were all-grade (PK-12) configurations.¹ Student enrollment frequencies ranged from 300-600 (49%) to more than 1200 (4%) with slightly

more than one-half (51%) of the total being situated in rural communities, 29% in urban neighborhoods, and 20% in suburban communities. Administrator experience ranged from less than 3 years (26%) to 3–10 years (49%) to more than 20 years (6%). Overall, principal gender was evenly split while two-thirds of assistant principals were female. Table 1 summarizes participant data.

Table 1

Summary Characteristics of Participating Schools, Communities, and Administrators, as Reported by Respondents (N = 214)

| Characteristic | Percentage |
|---------------------------|------------|
| School type | |
| Primary/Elementary | 46.8 |
| Middle/Junior High School | 14.0 |
| High School | 12.6 |
| Junior/High School | 13.1 |
| All-Grade | 11.7 |
| Community type | |
| Rural | 50.9 |
| Urban | 29.0 |
| Suburban | 20.1 |
| Enrollment size | |
| <300 | 18.3 |
| 300–600 | 49.3 |
| 601–900 | 23.0 |
| 901–1200 | 5.2 |
| >1200 | 4.2 |
| Administrative experience | |
| < 3 yrs. | 26.2 |
| 3–10 yrs. | 48.6 |
| 11–20 yrs. | 19.2 |
| >20 yrs. | 6.1 |

Results

As noted, the survey data were analyzed using Schein's (1992) underlying dimensions of organizational culture as lenses through which to examine collaborative value orientations of the respondents as well as their perceptions of actual collaborative practices and conditions in their schools. Comparisons were made by applying paired sample tests (*t*-tests) to each duo of items to determine whether their means were statistically different—in effect, to ascertain if administrator beliefs about collabora-

tive practices were at variance with the actual circumstances they perceived to be prevalent in their schools. Scale internal reliability (Cronbach's *alpha*) for the 12 paired items was determined to be .88. Considerable differences were recorded in the group mean effect sizes. Cohen's *d* ranged from a small effect size of .24 to a high of .79.

Table 2 summarizes the survey results addressing the nature of teacher collaboration and their collaborative relationships (Schein's 1992 notion of "human activity"). The data are presented in terms of both 'administrator beliefs' and the perceived 'actual circumstances' in their schools. Significant mean differences were found in all paired sets ($p < .001$). In each case, the school administrators scored their personal beliefs about the nature of teacher shared work and working relationships higher than what they considered to be reflected in actual circumstances in their schools. For example, although they indicated that professional collaboration is "highly desirable" ($M = 4.73$, $SD = 0.62$), they rated actual collaborative work in their own schools significantly lower ($M = 4.00$, $SD = 0.83$). Collaborative environments are typically characterized by high levels of involvement in decision making (Koehler & Baxter, 1997; Wohlstetter et al., 1994; Lawler, 1986). However, there was strong indication that, although the respondents believed schools should be so characterized ($M = 4.29$, $SD = 0.73$), they did not consider that state of affairs to be sufficiently evident in their schools ($M = 3.72$, $SD = 0.85$).

Table 2

A Comparison of School Administrators' Beliefs Versus Perceived Actual Circumstances Regarding Professional Collaboration and Collaborative Relationships (N = 214)

| Survey item | Admin. beliefs | | Actual circumst. | | <i>t</i> * | <i>df</i> | <i>d</i> |
|---|----------------|-----------|------------------|-----------|------------|-----------|----------|
| | <i>M</i> | <i>SD</i> | <i>M</i> | <i>SD</i> | | | |
| Professional collaboration among teachers is highly desirable. | 4.73 | 0.62 | 4.00 | 0.83 | 13.00 | 208 | .50 |
| Schools should be characterized by high levels of participation in decision making. | 4.29 | 0.73 | 3.72 | 0.85 | 9.19 | 210 | .37 |
| Teaching should be more about co-operation and teamwork than about competition and individualism. | 4.76 | 0.52 | 4.06 | 0.84 | 12.34 | 212 | .51 |

(continued)

Table 2 (*continued*)

| Survey item | Admin. beliefs | | Actual circumst. | | <i>t</i> * | <i>df</i> | <i>d</i> |
|--|-------------------|-----------|---------------------|-----------|------------|-----------|----------|
| | <i>M</i> | <i>SD</i> | <i>M</i> | <i>SD</i> | | | |
| Maintaining a trusting and caring relationship is essential to collaborative practice. | 4.77 | 0.49 | 3.98 | 0.77 | 14.93 | 213 | .63 |
| Teachers collaborate better when they genuinely like each other. | 4.61 | 0.64 | 3.94 | 0.79 | 11.85 | 213 | .47 |
| Schools function better when teachers have highly similar values and beliefs. | 4.42 | 0.76 | 4.00 | 0.82 | 7.61 | 213 | .27 |
| Diversity of opinion and practice promotes the maintenance of a healthy school organization. | 4.17 | 0.82 | 3.75 | 0.92 | 6.45 | 211 | .24 |

* $p < .001$, two-tailed, for all t values.

Further evidence of actual collaborative circumstances being less than desirable was provided in the paired items addressing the ‘nature of professional relationships.’ While the school administrators strongly believed that teaching should be “more about co-operation and teamwork than about competition and individualism” ($M = 4.76$, $SD = 0.52$), it was not as apparent in their schools ($M = 4.06$, $SD = 0.84$). Furthermore, whereas there was comparable support for the notion of the importance of “maintaining trusting and caring relationships” ($M = 4.77$, $SD = 0.49$), the respondents did not consider such a circumstance to be adequately present ($M = 3.98$, $SD = 0.77$). There was also the indication of a collective belief that teachers actually “collaborate better when they genuinely like each” ($M = 4.61$, $SD = 0.64$), yet there was the accompanying perception that faculty in their schools did not have as high an affinity for each other as may be required to promote optimal collaborative practices ($M = 3.94$, $SD = 0.79$).

Table 2 also summarizes those paired items analogous to Schein’s (1992) ‘nature of organizational diversity’ items. The compelling conclusion based on significant differences in the paired means is that, in the view of the respondents, teachers do not embrace sufficiently congruent beliefs and values yet also do not reflect sufficiently variant opinions and practices to sustain optimal organizational conditions.² Although the disparities in ratings were not as substantial as the other paired items, there were significant differences ($p < .001$) in comparisons of the administra-

tors' beliefs and perceptions of actual circumstances that "schools function better when teachers have highly similar values and beliefs" ($M = 4.42$, $SD = 0.76$ versus $M = 4.00$, $SD = 0.82$) and that "diversity of opinion and practice promotes the maintenance of a healthy school organization" ($M = 4.17$, $SD = 0.82$ versus $M = 3.75$, $SD = 0.92$).

The ubiquitous 'issue of time' is almost always a prevalent problem when consideration is given to how and when teachers attempt to come together to share work and ideas (Dipardo, 1997; Knop, LeMaster, Norris, Raudensky, & Tannehill, 1997; Naylor, 2002; Leonard & Leonard, 2001). The data collected from the 214 principals and assistant principals in this study also clearly revealed it as being problematic (see Table 3). There was strong agreement with the survey items suggesting that "teachers need sufficient time to work together professionally" ($M = 4.72$, $SD = 0.51$) and that "frequent professional collaboration is an appropriate use of teachers' time" ($M = 4.57$, $SD = 0.57$). However, perceptions of actual conditions were much less supportive and, again, were significantly different from the belief portion of the paired items. The mean rating given to the statement regarding "enough time" actually being available received a survey low mean of 3.42 ($SD = 1.13$) while considerations that "In my school, professional collaboration is considered an appropriate use of teacher's time" was scored a mean rating of 4.25 ($SD = 0.77$). As with all differences between the paired items, they were significant to the .001 level. A third set of matched items also pointed to disparities between what the administrators indicated they believed about the appropriate relationship between time and professional collaboration and what was actually extant in their schools. They indicated that institutional "expectations" of collaborative time expenditure were not as strong as they should be ($M = 4.24$, $SD = 0.77$ versus $M = 3.83$, $SD = 0.91$; $p < .001$).

Table 3

Comparison of School Administrators' Beliefs About Opportunities and Support for Professional Collaboration Versus Its Prevalence in Their Schools (N = 214)

| Survey item | Admin. beliefs | | Actual circumst. | | t^* | df | d |
|--|----------------|------|------------------|------|-------|------|-----|
| | M | SD | M | SD | | | |
| Teachers need sufficient time to effectively work together professionally. | 4.72 | 0.51 | 3.42 | 1.13 | 15.96 | 213 | .79 |
| Frequent professional collaboration is an appropriate use of teachers' time. | 4.57 | 0.57 | 4.25 | 0.77 | 6.77 | 209 | .24 |

(continued)

Table 3 (*continued*)

| Survey item | Admin. beliefs | | Actual circumst. | | <i>t</i> * | <i>df</i> | <i>d</i> |
|--|-------------------|-----------|---------------------|-----------|------------|-----------|----------|
| | <i>M</i> | <i>SD</i> | <i>M</i> | <i>SD</i> | | | |
| Expectations of collaborative practice strongly influence teachers' use of their time. | 4.24 | 0.77 | 3.83 | 0.91 | 7.36 | 209 | .24 |
| Effective teacher collaboration requires sufficient administrative support. | 4.67 | 0.65 | 4.36 | 0.76 | 5.50 | 209 | .22 |
| Teachers need to possess special skills to be effective professional collaborators. | 3.97 | 0.97 | 3.71 | 0.91 | 3.37 | 208 | .14 |

* $p < .001$, two-tailed, for all t values.

The apparent view that expectations for professional collaboration were lacking was corroborated in the paired statements directly addressing administrative support. With a mean rating of 4.67 ($SD = 0.65$) the respondents strongly indicated that teacher collaboration "requires sufficient administrative support" yet were less emphatic that it was apparent in their own schools ($M = 4.36$, $SD = 0.76$; $p < .001$). A final set of Likert-scale paired items asked the school administrators to consider whether teachers need special skills to be effective collaborators. Again, there were significant differences in mean scores allocated to the need for teachers "to possess special skills" ($M = 3.97$, $SD = 0.97$) and to the notion that their own teachers needed to "learn more about how to be more effective professional collaborators" ($M = 3.71$, $SD = 0.91$).

There is one other aspect of the data that is worthy of particular note. While disaggregation of the administrator data shows quite similar overall mean item ratings of principals and assistant principals in terms of their beliefs about professional collaboration (principals, $M = 4.51$; assistant principals, $M = 4.47$), there was considerable variation between the two groups in terms of the overall mean ratings of actual conditions at their schools (principals, $M = 4.05$; assistant principals, $M = 3.78$). The disaggregated data are presented in Table 4 and Table 5.

Table 4

A Comparison of Principals' (N = 112) and Assistant Principals' (N = 102) Beliefs Versus Perceived Actual Circumstances Regarding Professional Collaboration and Collaborative Relationships

| Survey item | Admin. position | Admin. beliefs | | Actual circumst. | | <i>t</i> * | <i>df</i> |
|---|--------------------|-------------------|-----------|---------------------|-----------|------------|-----------|
| | | <i>M</i> | <i>SD</i> | <i>M</i> | <i>SD</i> | | |
| Professional collaboration among teachers is highly desirable. | Principal | 4.77 | 0.45 | 4.05 | 0.70 | 10.41 | 107 |
| | Asst. Prncpl. | 4.70 | 0.76 | 3.91 | 0.94 | 8.32 | 100 |
| Schools should be characterized by high levels of participation in decision making. | Principal | 4.33 | 0.71 | 4.00 | 0.72 | 6.04 | 109 |
| | Asst. Prncpl. | 4.25 | 0.75 | 3.49 | 0.91 | 7.30 | 100 |
| Teaching should be more about co-operation and teamwork than about competition and individualism. | Principal | 4.78 | 0.44 | 4.17 | 0.77 | 8.71 | 110 |
| | Asst. Prncpl. | 4.73 | 0.60 | 3.94 | 0.90 | 8.83 | 101 |
| Maintaining a trusting and caring relationship is essential to collaborative practice. | Principal | 4.75 | 0.43 | 4.14 | 0.61 | 11.37 | 111 |
| | Asst. Prncpl. | 4.78 | 0.56 | 3.79 | 0.88 | 10.90 | 101 |
| Teachers collaborate better when they genuinely like each other. | Principal | 4.58 | 0.65 | 4.07 | 0.71 | 7.87 | 111 |
| | Asst. Prncpl. | 4.66 | 0.62 | 3.80 | 0.86 | 9.19 | 101 |
| Schools function better when teachers have highly similar values and beliefs. | Principal | 4.43 | 0.71 | 4.13 | 0.75 | 4.62 | 111 |
| | Asst. Prncpl. | 4.43 | 0.83 | 3.87 | 0.88 | 6.15 | 101 |
| Diversity of opinion and practice promotes the maintenance of a healthy school organization. | Principal | 4.20 | 0.75 | 3.97 | 0.78 | 3.61 | 111 |
| | Asst. Prncpl. | 4.13 | 0.91 | 3.51 | 1.00 | 5.51 | 99 |

**p* < .001, two-tailed, for all *t* values.

Table 5

Comparison of Principals' (N = 112) and Assistant Principals' (N = 102) Beliefs About Opportunities and Support for Professional Collaboration Versus Its Prevalence in Their Schools

| Survey item | Admin. position | Admin. beliefs | | Actual circumst. | | <i>t</i> * | <i>df</i> |
|--|--------------------|-------------------|-----------|---------------------|-----------|------------|-----------|
| | | <i>M</i> | <i>SD</i> | <i>M</i> | <i>SD</i> | | |
| Teachers need sufficient time to effectively work together professionally. | Principal | 4.72 | 0.45 | 3.47 | 1.10 | 11.74 | 111 |
| | Asst. Prncpl. | 4.71 | 0.57 | 3.38 | 1.17 | 10.81 | 101 |
| Frequent professional collaboration is an appropriate use of teachers' time. | Principal | 4.56 | 0.53 | 4.35 | 0.67 | 3.83 | 109 |
| | Asst. Prncpl. | 4.57 | 0.61 | 4.14 | 0.85 | 5.70 | 99 |
| Expectations of collaborative practice strongly influence teachers' use of their time. | Principal | 4.28 | 0.73 | 3.97 | 0.82 | 4.91 | 108 |
| | Asst. Prncpl. | 4.20 | 0.80 | 3.67 | 0.97 | 5.58 | 100 |
| Effective teacher collaboration requires sufficient administrative support. | Principal | 4.75 | 0.45 | 4.52 | 0.57 | 4.45 | 108 |
| | Asst. Prncpl. | 4.58 | 0.80 | 4.18 | 0.89 | 3.86 | 100 |
| Teachers need to possess special skills to be effective professional collaborators. | Principal | 4.00 | 0.91 | 3.75 | 0.83 | 2.12 | 108 |
| | Asst. Prncpl. | 3.97 | 1.03 | 3.66 | 1.00 | 3.12 | 99 |

**p* < .001, two-tailed, for all *t* values.

Conclusions and Implications

The survey data collected from the school administrators in 12 North Louisiana school districts provide the opportunity to uncover additional insights into the extent that schools operate as professional learning communities. By consistently rating their beliefs about the desirability of professional collaboration significantly higher than what they perceived to be actual conditions in their schools, the 214 participating principals and assistant principals indicated that they do not consider their schools to be where they ought to be in terms of providing optimal opportunities for teacher shared learning. The school administrators reported robust support

for the essential tenets of professional collaboration. They suggested that teacher shared work is highly desirable, that they should be regularly involved in decision making, and that teaching should be about cooperation and teamwork rather than competition and individualism. In each of the relevant survey items, they rated actual circumstances in their schools to be lacking (see Table 2). Additionally, in terms of collaborative relationships, they felt that their school environments did not induce enough care and trust among the faculties, that teachers did not seem to like each other sufficiently, that levels of shared values and beliefs were not adequate, and that diversity of opinion was not promoted to the extent desirable. This is particularly poignant in consideration of the entreaty of noted school culture expert Andy Hargreaves in Sparks (2004) that professional learning communities must be led by principals who “encourage teachers to disagree and to challenge each other” (p. 48). Nonetheless, the evident conclusion is that, as a group, these administrators were dissatisfied with the prevailing collaborative conditions at their 149 North Louisiana schools. This corresponds closely with earlier research findings that teachers in the region were also critical of the existing professional conditions in their schools (Leonard, 2002; Leonard & Leonard, 2003).³

Teachers are less likely to engage in professional interaction if there are insufficient opportunities and expectations to do so. The survey data summarized in Table 3 suggest that these were the administrators’ perceptions of the actual circumstances in their schools. Just like the region’s teachers in the earlier survey, principals and assistant principals were emphatic that there is insufficient time for teachers to collaborate regularly. Although statistical differences did exist between beliefs and actual circumstances, the administrators were somewhat less resolute that circumstances at their schools suggested that shared work was not a priority use of teacher time or that administrative support for collaboration was inadequate. As had teacher participants in the earlier study, the administrator respondents also indicated that their teachers could benefit from the development of additional collaborative skills.

The research outlined here once again firmly endorses that teacher professional collaboration is valued by most educators. Nonetheless, the 214 participating school site administrators just as clearly indicated that prevailing circumstances at their schools do not reflect the nature and the extent of collaborative practice that they believe are desirable. The data support earlier research undertaken by the authors (Leonard & Leonard, 2003; Leonard, 2002; Leonard & Leonard, 2001, 1999) and reinforce conclusions that, despite the passage of time and the continuing research-based dialogue regarding professional learning communities (e.g., Fullan, 2001; Hall & Hord, 2001; Speck, 1999), substantial school improvement in that direction may yet be seriously deficient. Changing the culture of a school to better reflect the norms of professional involvement, as with any attempt at cultural change, can be an ambitious and difficult task (Chenoweth & Everhart, 2002; Maehr & Midgley, 1996; Stoll & Fink, 1996). Nonetheless, the compelling argument is that sustained student improvement—regardless if it is gauged by standardized tests or

otherwise—may only be realized when teachers themselves are heavily engaged in learning—particularly the localized and practice-oriented learning that is generated when colleagues engage in regular and meaningful discourse about their work.⁴

In sum, information sharing, idea generation, and instructional skills refinement are the essentials of authentic teacher collaborative practice. If—as this and earlier research seem to strongly indicate is the case—schools continue to fall short of providing the structures, the resources, and the expectations for them to consistently occur at the school site, the image of schools as professional learning communities, for all its intuitive attraction, may remain more of an isolated apparition than a common reality. While there are doubtless mitigating circumstances—among them the extent of teacher commitment, resource allocation, and community support—the elemental responsibility for ensuring that this unfavorable circumstance does not continue to prevail lies largely with those charged with the direct supervision of schools: site-based administrators. As Holt (2004) pithily states: “Principals must build a community of learners, and it is the principal’s role to develop and nurture that community” (p. 65). The research reported here seems to indicate that many administrators already appreciate the need for sustained professional interaction in their schools but, also, that they may be unwilling, or unable without sufficient support from other significant participants, to adequately foster its manifestation. In either case, the challenges—although evident—may remain unmet in many schools.

Notes

¹ Total exceeds 100% due to rounding.

² This point will be discussed further in the conclusions section.

³ The earlier studies involved 238 teachers in 88 schools within 10 North Louisiana school districts.

⁴ For specific examples of how this may be achieved see Patterson & Rolheiser, 2004.

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